

Feminism and Fashion of the Twentieth Century

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Looking back in history it is easy to see how politics have affected movements like the fight for women's rights and equality. Women and men together have always been expected to follow certain styles and trends depending on the time period, but women seemed to have broken that mold over the past two centuries. Through the three waves of feminism, women's clothing has been refined depending on factors such as changes in political policies, periods of war, and feminist activism.

The first wave of feminism began in 1850. During this time, women who were working towards suffrage were seen to be manly or masculine in their "bloomers." To avoid the opinions of others, women involved in dress reform began to move away from the suffragettes. In turn, the suffragettes decided to avoid all ridicule and dress more fashionably so people would listen to their message and not pay attention to their clothing. These women wore tailor made suits with sashes across them that said women's rights messages. Moving into the 1920's, women were able to vote and fashion began to change drastically. Pants were finally acceptable for women during the 1930's. Although pants were only worn for lounge wear or at the beach, this acceptance was a huge step in the right direction for women's dress reform.

As World War II began, men left for war and women remained behind. With men leaving their jobs women were called to action to fill in the men's positions. Women adopted men's work attire, but were still not seen wearing pants outside of work. After World War II, women went back to staying at home cooking and cleaning. The introduction of Dior's "New Look" completely defined the 1950's. Women from all over were taking on Dior's style of a nipped-in waist and below-the-knee skirt. Through the 1950's more subcultures developed as well. Greasers and beatnik styles developed, and women began to incorporate pants into their everyday fashion.

The second wave began in 1960. Fashion icons included Jackie Kennedy and big name designers included Pierre Cardin. Men and women began to express themselves more through their fashion with styles like punk and hippie fashion. Women began to protest and break down societal norms for women in ways such as throwing their bras into freedom trash cans. In the second wave, gay women became involved in feminism, but until the 1970's feminist movements were primarily composed of white women. Looking at the third wave of feminism, feminists don't have to dress a certain way, be a certain gender, or identify with an ethnicity. There begin to be no limitations as to who a feminist is or what a feminist looks like. Many subcultures arose through the 90's that allowed even more self-expression.

Through changes over time, women have moved away from traditional standards of dress. During the 1800's women were expected to wear corsets and uncomfortable bustles. Nowadays, women can be seen wearing a huge range of styles. Women are accepted in society whether they are wearing tight shirts and short skirts, or baggy jeans and t shirts. Dress reform was persuaded by political leaders and wars, but feminists have worked extremely hard to bring women to where we are today, feeling free to express ourselves through clothes however we want.

